

Turning Research into Classroom Practice: AKA “So What!?”

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Turning Research into Classroom Practice: AKA “So What!?” is a bridge to disseminate research into the classroom. A research informed instructor is an up-to-date instructor! In this feature, an article from the Interior Design discipline of Family and Consumer Sciences is examined. A quick review of the article is followed by real and practical applications that can be incorporated into the classroom.

Article citation:

Ruff, C.L. & Olson, M.A. (2009). The attitudes of interior design students towards sustainability. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, (Vol. 19), 67-77.

Quick review of the article:

The authors performed a study to investigate interior design students' attitudes toward environmental issues. They focused specifically on sustainability, a timely topic in all FCS fields. They began the review of literature with discussions about humans feeling there was no end to resources, and the effect on the environment this mentality has had. Specific figures for home building are shared: a 2,320 Sq. ft. home generates 6,960-12,064 lbs. of waste during construction. Estimates are that 90% of this waste could be eliminated with better management practices and use of sustainable methods and products. Earth summits world-wide have called for better and more sustainable practices; education, particularly among interior designers is one pathway to achieving this goal. The cradle-to-cradle (aka c2c) task force has developed specific items for future designers so that they will be encouraged to practice sustainable design. Examples include 1) avoiding finishes and materials that give off gas toxic fumes, 2) focus on products with longer life spans, 3) avoid use of landfills when possible.

The authors surveyed students enrolled in an interior design program at a state university. A sample of 95 students was surveyed, a majority were female, and between the ages of 18-25. The survey was based on the NEP (New Ecological Paradigm Scale) and was modified to include 4 parts: demographics, ecology, sustainability, and personal comments regarding sustainability. There were 25 total items on ecology and sustainability using a 5 point Likert scale.

Results indicated that students had a favorable response to sustainability when it related to nature, closely followed by well-being of the Earth. Students were less favorable about discussions that the Earth was failing. In general, students felt confident in their ability to use sustainable products for design projects. They were less confident when needing to defend additional related costs.

Open ended comments asking what students personally do for sustainability largely resulted in the answer “recycling”. As for recommended sustainability to clients, they mentioned alternative building materials, energy conservation, use of solar power, composting, use of natural light, use of passive solar, reuse of furniture, use of alternative finishes, and use of Energy Star appliances. Similar lists appeared when they were asked for their personal recommendation in their own design projects.

Not surprisingly, authors concluded that students were at least moderately positive toward sustainability and the environment, though to varying degrees. Educators can do more to aid students in understanding the importance of these practices. While recycling is important, it was the focus of many students’ answer. Authors suggested that educators begin using the Interior Design Educators Council information as a start for classroom information.

Practice or “So What!?”... how can I apply this in my classroom?:

Students and faculty in the Interior Design and Merchandising discipline can learn from points made in this article. Sustainability is an important part of being an interior designer. The inclusion of this topic in courses is an important part of the field, and will influence students in their future careers. The following are activities in which students can learn about these issues:

- a) Invite an expert designer who incorporates sustainability in their design. Ask them to speak about how this influences their choices and how they relay this to clients.
- b) Have students interview two designers, one who practices sustainability, and one who does not. Have them compare and contrast their work. What are the pros and cons of both styles?
- c) Have students research the costs of practicing design with sustainability in mind. Does it cost more? In what ways? How can it be done with equal costs? Or can it?
- d) Have an in class discussion about the differences between residential and commercial construction. Should there be different standards? What are the implications of upholding the same standards?
- e) If possible, have students (as a group) visit a land fill. Ask the workers about the types of things that fill it and how much design and construction contribute.
- f) Ask students to interview a construction company employee and talk about sustainability and costs they face. What are pros and cons?
- g) Organize students in small groups. Ask them to pick one idea that is sustainable. What can they do, as a designer, to put this idea into practice?
- h) Have students research designers on the Internet. Do they see any that list sustainability as one of their selling points? What are some things that are mentioned when sustainability is part of the “sales pitch”?

- i) What sustainability topics are most interesting to students? Find speakers on those topics and invite them to class for a panel discussion.
- j) Have students read *Cradle to Cradle* (noted below) and discuss the points made.
- k) Have students research sustainability in the building industry. What types of certifications do they note and how do the builders promote the certifications on their websites?
- l) If possible, tour a building that was built with sustainability in mind. Ask students to identify features that denote sustainability.
- m) Ask students to research campus and see if any recent construction has met sustainability requirements. What type of things were done?
- n) Have students identify one practice that focuses on sustainability and ask them to practice it for one month. Ask them to report on it, how do they feel during? After? Will they keep the practice going?

Additional reading

McDonough, W. & Braungart, M. (2002). *Cradle to Cradle*. New York, NY: North Point Press.